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Essay: For Men Only

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ESSAY

by Randall Huff

For Men Only:

Support the Take Back the Night Rally

Imagine yourself in a maximum security prison. Whether you are actually attacked or not, there are moments of utter terror. In such an atmosphere of fear, perception becomes reality. You begin to think differently about yourself, the people around you and your surroundings. You've heard stories about the physical violence which occurs here—everything from simple assault to rape and murder—but these tales are probably exaggerated. Perhaps you can diminish the odds of becoming a victim by the way you act and dress. How comfortable do you feel?

Many women feel equally uncomfortable about their personal safety in our society. This is an especially critical survival instinct in women of college age, many of whom are the more vulnerable for living on their own for the first time. The necessary caution in choosing where and with whom to live can lead to an overwhelming sense of vulnerability; it can become the determining factor in so many decisions that seriously affect how these people live.

It is tempting for men to dismiss the Take Back the Night movement as irrelevant. It is, after all, organized by women, and its primary objective is to prevent violence against women. Past demonstrations, especially those in Vancouver, British Columbia, have banned men and encouraged such male-bashing shenanigans as burning a male figure in effigy. More common, and probably more effective, are marches, chants and speeches. Collectively, these voices are a cry in the darkness against the bestial nature of our worst selves, a lament for our past transgressions and perhaps a call for a more sophisticated, a more responsible and a more democratic future.

Anything that we can do to decrease the current level of violence against women has tremendous advantages for our gender. Men gain almost as much as women from such tangible improvements as better lighting, increased security and safer streets. Of far greater consequence is the fact that we are so intimately connected with individual women that anything affecting their lives so profoundly must also affect ours. If our society could be made less violent, then the women we love would be less likely to be traumatized, thus more easily allowing them to fully realize their human potential. How could we fail to benefit when those with whom we form the most intimate bonds are free to attain higher levels of self-actualization? Association with such people clearly plays an important role in our development.



Civility Pledge

- * I will never strike a woman.
- * I will never threaten violence or display verbal aggression in a domestic situation.
- * I will never think like a sexual predator.
- * I will support the Take Back the Night Rally and urge others to do so.

(signed)

It is important for our mutual survival that college women discover their collective as well as individual voices, for the leadership required for tomorrow's challenges is as likely to appear in their gender as in ours. Despite centuries of economic, political and social oppression, a few women were able to foster brave experiments in social reform in the course of the last two centuries. Freedom from fear is the necessary first step towards the extraordinary progress that will be made when every woman is given equal access to our collective birthright, our freedom as Americans. Think about how important your freedom is to you, and you will begin to realize the criminality of perpetuating those aspects of our society which jeopardize such a basic right as personal safety.

As men, we play a crucial role in making our society safer for women. We must accept the collective responsibility of our gender for what we have heretofore comfortably regarded as the aberrant behavior of a few individual men. The statistics do not support our self-conceit. Hopefully, the frequently cited estimate that one in four women will be sexually assaulted in the course of their lives is vastly inflated. It is clear, however, when one also considers the prevalence of domestic violence and other assaults, that the attitudes which foster such attacks are so deeply rooted as to necessitate collective action by both genders.

Violence so permeates our society that it sometimes seems the natural end of our evolution. This lends a certain quixotic quality to the fight; it seems doomed to fail because it seems so unnatural. Perhaps we've only been conditioned to think violent behavior has been responsible for the success of our species; the reality may well be that we've survived in spite of it. As individual men, perhaps we should take our cue from the sobriety pledges administered by the temperance groups on campus and adopt a civility pledge in order to facilitate discussion about our responsibility. Ultimately, only by reforming our individual attitudes can we improve our society.